

Moss Garden Masterpiece

BY MARK DWYER

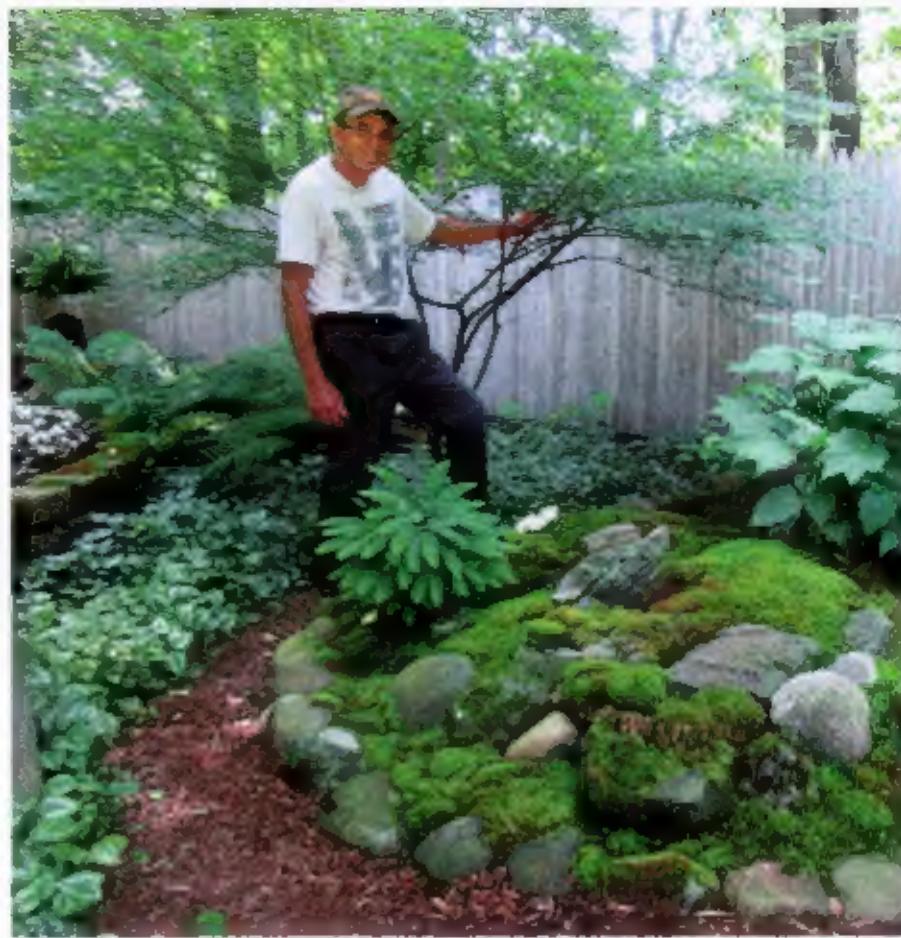
Layers of perennials and shrubs embrace the moss carpeting Dale Sievert's Japanese garden in Waukesha, Wisconsin.

A series of paths moves you through a progression of spaces, each of which is defined by available sunlight and changes in elevation. Mossy garden vignettes begin at the front of the residence and weave through the garden with moss not only evident in large patches but on rocks, logs, and in many containers. Thousands of perennials, planted primarily for their foliage color and texture, also thread throughout the space, forming a rich matrix of color. "I love perennials with arresting foliage and form, and care little about their short-lived flowers," says Sievert. More common hostas, ferns, and traditional groundcovers are augmented by drifts of less common Rodger's flower (*Rodgersia* sp.), yellow waxy bells (*Kirengeshoma* sp.), umbrella plant (*Darmera peltata*), and the always eye-catching 'Sun King' Japanese spikenard (*Aralia cordata*).

Top right: Dale Sievert shows off one of his favorite cultivated moss hummocks accented with ferns and yellow wax bells (*Kirengeshoma palmata*). Bottom right: Beneath the multi-stemmed katsura tree (*Cercidiphyllum japonicum*), a sinuous rock-lined path leads over a footbridge to the raked gravel garden.

Opposite page: Repurposed antique Milwaukee bricks create the paths of the Williamsburg-inspired formal garden filled with red and white annual begonias. Instead of a traditional lawn, Sievert has cultivated tree moss (*Climacium americanum*) to replicate the effect of turf.

While the use of moss is a dominant theme in Sievert's garden, his property features a wide range of other plants. A cacti and succulent garden occupies the sunny front elevation, along with some mosses that tolerate full sun. For arriving visitors, the first indication they are in for some serious moss gardening starts under a grove of ironwood trees (*Ostrya virginiana*) along the driveway. Closer to the house, a sunken garden featuring tropicals in containers transitions to multiple shady moss respite along the edge of an oval of turf. In the back corner of the property, which is the highest point, a shady hillside garden leads to a significant waterfall system. The waterfall, ponds, and streams, all accented with moss, flow back toward the house, where they culminate in a Japanese-style garden. The Japanese garden, which was started in the late 1990s, has





become so magical that Sievert installed an eight-foot-wide picture window in his house so he could view this scene throughout the seasons. A formal garden, inspired by a trip to Colonial Williamsburg in Virginia, is adjacent to the Japanese garden.

One of the remarkable features of the garden, located on a sloped piece of land with a 20-foot elevation change from front to rear, is its hardscaping. A vast system of paths, patios, and retaining walls incorporate 5,000 antique bricks and 2,000 antique cobblestones repurposed from the streets of Milwaukee. An additional system of retaining walls made of railroad ties or stacked rock creates wonderful planting pockets throughout the garden. These hundreds of tons of rock that were acquired, positioned, and placed on site specifically by Sievert amount to over 11,000 rocks and boulders. Many of these hardscape elements, now covered with moss, contribute to the lush feel throughout the garden.

INSPIRED BY PLACES AT HOME AND ABROAD

The initial plantings in Sievert's garden date back to 1970, when his home was

built. At that time he was an economics professor at Milwaukee Area Technical College, but he also ran a landscape maintenance company and operated a nursery for many years. It was a 2005 trip to the former Foxfire Garden in Marshfield, Wisconsin, however, that first inspired Sievert not only to encourage existing mosses in his garden but to actively acquire, plant and utilize mosses in a grand manner. Looking back on that visit, Sievert recalls a small mound area with lichen-covered, dark gray rocks among a sea of incredibly beautiful moss in dappled sunlight. "My life was changed forever! I became an instant moss aficionado; collecting it, reading about it and identifying species," states Sievert. By 2006, he was already experimenting with mosses in his home garden.

In addition to his transformational visit to Foxfire Garden, Sievert's gardening philosophy has been informed by his travels, which include visits to more than 100 countries. He has visited Japan twice, primarily Kyoto, primarily to see this region's renowned moss gardens. "Dale's



Resources

Common Mosses of the Northeast and Appalachians by Karl B. McKnight and others. Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 2013.

Gathering Moss: A Natural and Cultural History of Mosses by Robin Wall Kimmerer. Oregon State University Press, Corvallis, OR, 2003.

The Magical World of Moss Gardening by Annie Martin. Timber Press, Portland, OR, 2015.

Moss Gardening: Including Lichens, Liverworts and Other Miniatures by George Schenk. Timber Press, Portland, OR, 1997.

Commercial Sources

Moss Acres, Honesdale, PA. mossacres.com.

Mountain Moss, Brevard, NC. www.mountainmoss.com.

extensive travels around the world to visit botanical gardens have inspired him to create his own impressive moss retreat," says Annie Martin, owner of Mountain Moss Enterprises, Inc., and recognized moss expert. "His meticulous attention to detail has enabled him to maintain the moss magic."

There is little down time for Sievert, who at 78 still puts in at least 10 hours each day in the garden when he's not traveling or, occasionally, consulting on the use of mosses in other gardens. He has created five other well-received moss gardens both in public and private situations and has helped at many more, including at Rotary Gardens and at the Anderson Japanese Gardens in Rockford, Illinois. "Dale is absolutely passionate about moss and has been a great asset for us here at Anderson Japanese Gardens," says Tim Gruner, curator and head of horticulture for Anderson. "He has a great depth of knowledge regarding moss and how to grow it."

WORKING WITH MOSES

Sievert's skill with mosses is based partly on research and partly on trial and error. He freely admits that his first foray into moss gardening was not a success. After collecting moss off a neighbor's cedar shake roof (with permission of course), he found the transplanted pieces did not establish. This led him to the realization that replicating the conditions in which your "target moss" is found is a key to success. His next try with transplanted moss from the woods of another neighbor settled in well in his garden.

Sievert typically only collects small, four to six-inch patches of moss from

any one site so that the original patch is able to regenerate easily. Leaving about a half inch of soil substrate under the moss while carefully skimming it up allows for it to be transferred, pressed into place and watered. Moss does not have true roots and attaches by use of rhizoids, hence its ability to attach to boulders and other hard surfaces.

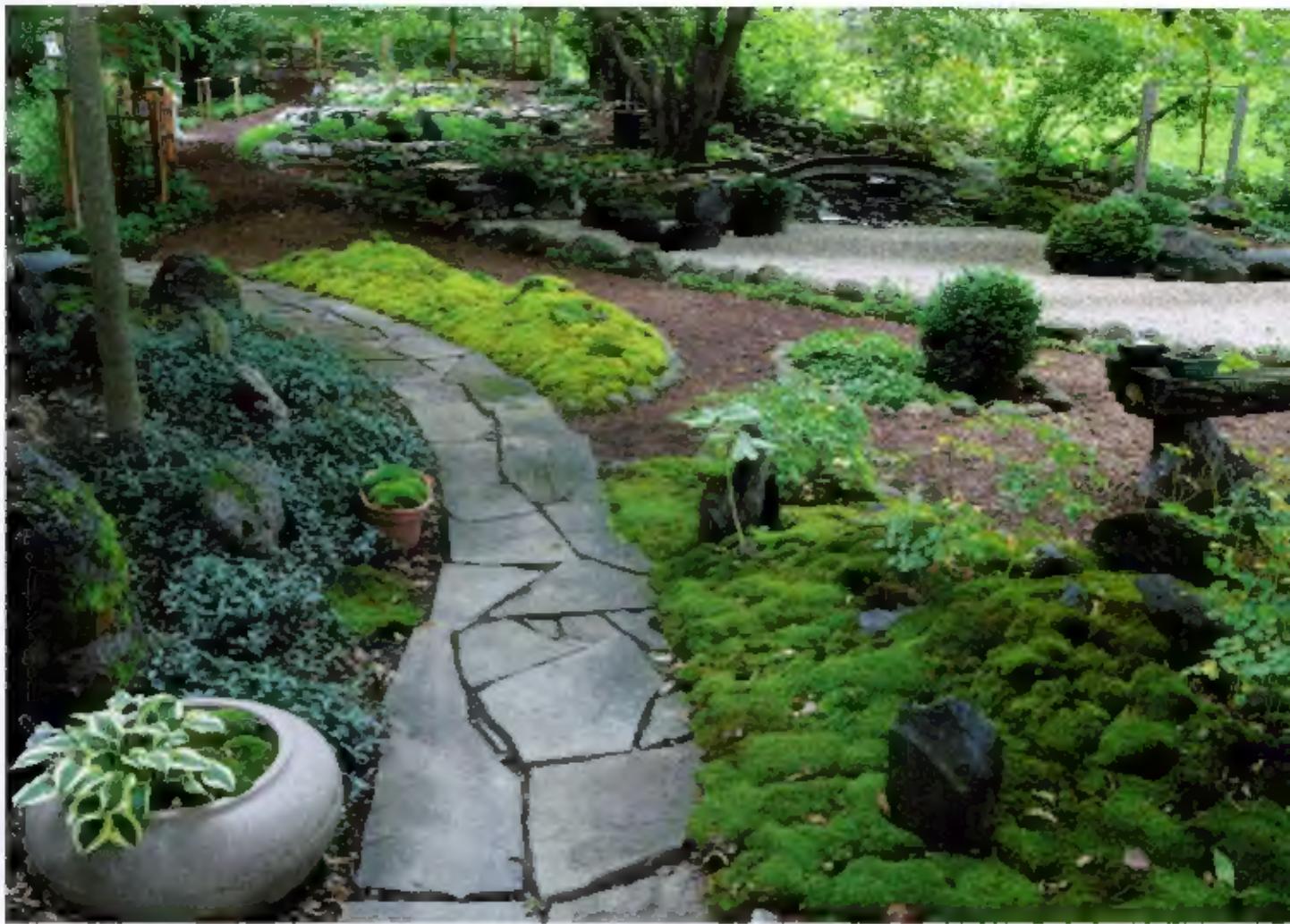
For those who might be interested in trying to grow moss, Sievert advises, "Start each moss garden with a sever-

al-month test of only one to two square feet. Mosses can be very particular where they grow, so it is better losing a small area rather than a large area." See the sidebar for tips (opposite page) on trying some moss in your own landscape. Always collect moss with permission and be aware of laws and restrictions to collecting mosses in wild or protected locations.

In addition to using the "patch planting" method described above, Sievert has expanded his use of moss by incorporating boulders, logs, and other features that are graced with mossy growth. The majority of his mossy spaces in the garden have their own topography and include a contrived, mounded underlayment, mossy rocks, and more to add subtle dynamism to the spaces. "I generally build specific moss gardens using two or three different species, and I use about 10 species in total. I incorporate rocks, often moss-covered, into my gardens, as well as small perennials, usually a foot tall or less, but up to two feet in height. I also often add a small moss-covered branch to lay on the top of my moss gardens." Some favorite, shorter perennials that he rec-



Sievert cultivates hundreds of containers of moss in his garden, including this one of yellow yarn moss (*Anomodon rostratus*), which forms a tight, textured bun.



From the entrance gate, patches and mounds of moss soften and highlight the Japanese garden, leading the eye through the serene space.

ommends include fragile fern (*Cystopteris fragilis*), early meadow rue (*Thalictrum dioicum*), and jack-in-the-pulpit (*Arisaema triphyllum*). Sievert also recommends using a small amount of 100 percent clear silicone caulk to attach moss patches to rocks or smooth surfaces which gives it some help in attaching more quickly.

Sievert has mastered planting shallow containers with moss and has hundreds adorning his garden. The earlier thematic spaces in Sievert's garden have become more beautiful with the addition of moss. Due to increasing shade in the symmetrical, Colonial Williamsburg-inspired garden, Sievert replaced the ailing turf entirely with tree moss (*Climacium americanum*), which mimics the look of a green lawn.

Sievert takes his role as an advocate for moss gardening seriously and is generous with his knowledge, scheduling many moss-related lectures, articles, and tours of his own garden to inspire others to embrace moss as a viable and impactful landscaping component. "I find moss

TIPS FOR STARTING A MOSS GARDEN

- Start with a small area of open soil of about two square feet.
- Consider multiple locations for experimentation.
- Use mosses found on site, collected with permission from neighboring properties, or purchased from ethical commercial sources (see box, opposite page).
- Harvest only small patches to avoid damaging fragile ecosystems.
- Try to match your site to the conditions in which you collected the moss (lighting, humidity, moisture, etc.).
- Place, water and press/step in to place with patches close together.
- Commit to moss maintenance (watering, removing debris, etc.).
- As you achieve success, consider moss on rocks, in containers, etc.

paradoxical," says Sievert. "It engenders serenity and tranquility when passing through gardens of it, but when hydrated and backlit by a low-angle sun it stuns the soul with a sensation that is electric!"

Sievert hopes his garden will help others understand and appreciate the value of mosses. A sign in the garden bears a quote from George Schenk, author of the classic *Moss Gardening* (see "Resources," opposite page), that states "Every John and Jane grows grass. Only nature's chosen grow moss." Sievert is most certainly one of nature's "chosen" and his love of the moss garden has already encouraged and inspired the next generation of moss aficionados. Having known Sievert personally for many years, I sense that he is just getting started with his exploration of mosses in the garden and the best is yet to come.

Mark Dwyer is a writer, speaker, and landscape design consultant based in Janesville, Wisconsin. You can read his blog at www.landscapesprescriptionsmd.com/marks-blog.